

# Written responses to questions – 17 July 2024

## Council meeting

### **A. Question from Councillor Povolotsky to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council**

Can the leader please explain why she has not made any attempts to meet with GARD - The Group Against Reservoir Development, despite their continued requests to meet, since she became leader in late 2022?

#### **Written response**

Thank you for your question; I understand that some ward members, around the area most affected by the reservoir, have had close contact with GARD and that members across this council are aware of their views. As I am sure you are aware GARD “a group of individuals whose aim is to identify and promote viable solutions to meet the future needs of water users in the Thames Water Region.” Whilst they are not the body ultimately tasked to undertake this function by Government, they contribute to this important debate and have made their views well known to key decision makers, as do those with alternative views.

Our council’s position on SESRO was highlighted by a unanimous resolution of the Council in December 2021. Vale “opposes the reservoir proposal unless or until the case for need for this specific solution (over and above the other potential cheaper, less disruptive, and less environmentally impactful solutions) has been clearly tested, demonstrated and agreed by independent scientific experts.”

So, at present our view is similar to GARD’s publicly expressed position, though this could change in the future.

In due course we will have a role to play as a statutory consultee in the formal decision making process for the SESRO proposal. As elected members, especially myself as leader, we cannot allow ourselves to appear predetermined in our views by aligning ourselves too closely with a campaigning organisation at this time, however much we may individually support its aims.

### **B. Question from Councillor Debby Hallett to Councillor Mark Coleman, Cabinet Member for Environmental Services and Waste**

For the 13 years I’ve been a member of this council, I have tried to urge the council to improve the litter and detritus removal on the verges and in the shrubs and trees alongside the A34.

The A34 is almost always strewn with rubbish, tyres and detritus. Highway repair crews leave their cones and frames and sandbags behind. Right now, the weeds have grown up enough that it's harder to see. (I recognise that there was recently a one-off blitz to get some control back. I am more concerned with the regular maintenance programme and less in heroics that make for good social media posts.)

What is Vale's responsibility to residents regarding litter removal from the A34, and what is our strategy for meeting that responsibility?

### **Written response**

I welcome this opportunity to clarify the responsibility of the council with regard to the cleansing of the A34, what we currently do and our strategy for the future.

In cleansing the A34, the council is required to follow Defra's [code of practice on litter and refuse](#). This means the A34 and lay-bys are cleansed to Grade A (No litter or refuse) and B (Predominately free of litter and refuse apart from some small items) standards. The council is not responsible for road sign maintenance or the cutting back of verges.

Cleansing the A34 must be done in conjunction with National Highways, who authorise closures for road works which we take advantage of to access the road when it is safe to do so, and OCC who are responsible for cutting back many of the verges.

The council undertakes its cleansing responsibilities through a contract with Biffa. The contract is output based and states the contractor should clean the roads to the standards set out in the Litter Code of Practice.

Biffa consider it unsafe to access the verges on this road without suitable traffic management. As the A34 is two laned, with a narrow hard shoulder, Biffa's policy only allows access to the verges to clear litter when the road is partially or fully closed. When there is no planned road closure, but urgent cleansing is required, Biffa subcontract verge cleansing to a company that have had specialist training on working on the side of roads without lane closures. In addition to general verge litter picking, Biffa attend to the 28 lay-bys that are on the A34. These are visited at least twice a week to empty the bins and to litter pick where it is safe to do so.

The council's Waste Team frequently monitor Biffa's performance around the lay-bys, and bin servicing is found to be good. Problems only occur when bins are blocked by fly tipped items. Keep Britain Tidy undertake independent inspections against the code of practice grades, with the latest information being from February of this year. They looked at 120 locations in Vale, grading each for litter, detritus, graffiti and fly-posting. The lay-bys are frequently litter picked, and in the last survey all inspected sites across the district were found to be grade A or B for litter. The contract performance is also monitored through a set of contract measures, and an annual performance report to Scrutiny. The report for 2023 was reviewed by Scrutiny on Monday 15 July 2024.

As part of the forthcoming waste resources and street cleansing strategy, a greater emphasis will be placed on street cleansing and the council will look to work more collaboratively with its partners in the county council, national highways, local groups including parish/town councils, and voluntary organisations and community groups. The aims of the strategy will be to:

- Reduce litter through a localised, community-driven approach.
- Reduce fly tipping.

- Clean streets in partnership with, and sensitive to, local needs.

Whoever the council employs to undertake street cleansing from 2026 (when the current contract with Biffa ends) will also be required to have a collaborative approach which looks for continual improvement, and the service specifications are currently being drafted to reflect the increased emphasis required in street cleansing.

### **C. Question from Councillor Robert Clegg to Councillor Helen Pighills, Cabinet Member for Community Health and Wellbeing**

The Joint Street Trading Policy, adopted by the Vale of White Horse District Council and South Oxfordshire District Council in 2014, sets out our framework for the management of street trading across the two district areas. The only substantial amendment to this policy since its adoption came into effect in 2020 and related to food hygiene and health and safety. The policy sits within the national legislative framework set out by the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1982.

In the decade since our policy was first adopted, the catering industry has faced many headwinds and has suffered as a consequence. The number of public houses across the UK has plummeted and street food vendors have also struggled, a situation exacerbated by but not limited to the Covid-19 pandemic. Those who have survived have often done so by innovating, adopting new approaches to better serve their customers.

Partnerships between “wet-led” public houses and mobile caterers, serving high-quality food from customised trucks or stalls, are one such innovation that has proven successful under these challenging market conditions. The Crown Inn in Marcham, in the ward which I serve, frequently hosts food trucks owned & operated by small, local businesses. After decades of the Crown struggling to stay open, the pub is now thriving and is a source of great pride to the village. The food trucks arrangement has proven immensely popular, to the benefit of the pub, the trucks, and the community. I understand that the chain owning the Crown has achieved similar success across the Vale, and also in South Oxfordshire. However, the variety of food offered by the mobile caterers at the Crown is constrained by the specifics of the Joint Street Trading Policy.

Could the Cabinet member please outline what opportunities there may be for making the policy more flexible and supportive of the local businesses of today, while still consistent with the relevant national legislation? For example, the Vale’s [Application for a Street Trading Consent](#) form constrains applicants to specify their Days and Hours of Operation (Section 4) within a regular, weekly pattern, despite the 1982 Act (Sections 3.2.b, 4.1.a) being worded in a less specific manner. Other district councils have adopted more flexible approaches to licencing street trading, often aided by modern digital technology, and I know that many local residents would like to see the Council (and our colleagues in South Oxfordshire) to follow suit.

## Written response

Street trading and mobile caterers provide a valuable service to local communities, and it is encouraging to hear of the successful operation at The Crown Inn in Marcham; a model that is replicated at a number of venues across the Vale (and also in South Oxfordshire).

This operational model didn't exist when the 2014 joint street trading policy was adopted, and we/officers recognise the need to update the policy to acknowledge and support new and innovative operations, such as the one at The Crown Inn. Officers are in the process of preparing a new proposed street trading policy. This will include a new section specifically for where multiple traders plan to trade simultaneously from one or more sites. This will aim to simplify the process for these traders, whilst still being compliant with the legislative requirements.

The proposed draft policy will be subject to a public consultation which all interested parties will be encouraged to respond to. The consultation is expected to take place during September and October 2024. Officers will work with the council's Communications and Engagement Team to publicise the consultation to ensure it reaches as wide an audience as possible. All responses will be taken into consideration before a revised new joint street trading policy is taken to the General Licensing Committee for consideration and adoption. Once adopted the application form and process will also be reviewed to ensure they reflect the requirements of local traders.

### **D. Question from Councillor Viral Patel to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the Council:**

We've had some exciting times since we last met as a council, as Labour establish a new government we wait to see how well they govern in their first term in office. The manifesto promises cover many of the things our residents rely on to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives, from homelessness, public ownership of rail, climate change, nature recovery and even the introduction of a National Care Service, it is a laundry list of needs and wants, many of which directly reference the governance of our districts.

Specifically, the Labour manifesto references:

*[Labour will introduce] "new statutory requirement for Local Growth Plans that cover towns and cities across the country. Local leaders will work with major employers, universities, colleges, and industry bodies to produce long-term plans that identify growth sectors and put in place the programmes and infrastructure they need to thrive. These will align with our national industrial strategy."*

*"Housing need in England cannot be met without planning for growth on a larger than local scale so we will introduce effective new mechanisms for cross-boundary strategic planning."*

*[Labour] "will also widen devolution to more areas, encouraging local authorities to come together and take on new powers."*

*"On housing and planning we will seek to consolidate powers to allow for improved decision making."*

Can the leader tell us how she believes these manifesto statements will impact the governance in the Vale of White Horse District Council and any implications for democratic accountability?

### **Written response**

The manifesto is one thing, the policies of government are often another, so I will not comment in detail at this stage. It is likely that councils will be at the forefront of delivery on the priorities for the new government which include more affordable homes, reducing homelessness and boosting sustainable and inclusive growth.

The Chief Executive, at my request, has recently contacted DLUHC, now known as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to ask that should any conversations be held around devolution or linked matters that the Vale of White Horse is contacted directly so that elected members are able to contribute to those discussions. Any revised devolution settlement aiming to unlock new opportunities and ensure that councils are suitably equipped to deliver at pace will require financial stability for local government addressing its funding challenges with no further unfunded costs burdens upon it from government. The new government's manifesto promise of a multi year financial settlement, once implemented, should allow easier future planning. In the absence of increased funding then there will need to be a continuing focus on driving efficiencies and generating revenue during times of challenging financial restraints. Planning reform and long term plans for housing - with or without housing targets - must ensure that there is enough infrastructure to mitigate development. It is likely that the NPPF will be redefined and strategic planning reintroduced in a move to boost housing supply.

The council has made clear its desire to work in partnership with government in planning and housing delivery rather than having targets imposed upon it. Going forward, the council will continue to take part in cross boundary collaboration with its neighbouring areas. We await the specifics of the new initiatives and any new legislation so that we can align our own activities to achieve the desired outcomes.

### **E. Question from Councillor Debra Dewhurst to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the council**

For a number of years, local councillors, including myself and Councillor Gascoigne, have been pushing for much needed medical facilities in Blewbury and Harwell ward, in the form of the Health Centre on Great Western Park (GWP).

Can you please explain why it has only come to light recently, to elected representatives and parish councils, that progress could not have been made with the GWP Health Centre until the Integrated Care Board (ICB) approved a business case and why local representatives for the immediately affected parishes of Western Valley and Harwell were not informed this was what was needed?

## **Written response**

The council is not responsible for the provision of health facilities within our District, The Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) are responsible for delivery of health services in Oxfordshire; I have always been clear about this with local members and residents and am therefore surprised by the question.

Our function as a council has been to work to support the ICB in delivery of the health centre at Great Western Park following the inclusion of the site, and involvement of the council, in the original 2008 planning application for Great Western Park (GWP).

As per the GWP S106 Agreement, the council will take transfer of the site and receive associated commuted sums from Taylor Wimpey, however this does not guarantee delivery of the health centre. The commuted sums defined in the S106 agreement were not of a magnitude which would have enabled delivery, hence the need to work with partners to establish a funded delivery route.

The council have therefore been working with relevant parties, led by the ICB, to bring forward delivery, which has resulted in achieving successful outcomes such as a variation to the S106 to include the identified delivery route and the approval of a business case by the ICB. The parties continue to work together to move the project forward and ensure that all elements are aligned.

The structure of the local NHS has changed a number of times during this long process, as has their view of exactly what provision is needed at GWP. This has been the cause of much frustration for the council, local councillors and the community. Whatever mechanism is required within the NHS to approve the development of a health centre is up to them. The Vale will continue to cooperate in whatever way we can to support the NHS in progressing the project.

To ensure local members are kept informed of the progress, officers have established a regular mechanism for updating elected representatives immediately affected by the project, which includes an update on progress across all workstreams and critical project stages to ensure clarity on the project going forward.